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CIVIC ART AND COUNTRY LIFE

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The expression "civic art" may not be, and is not, a misnomer as applied to country life, for, as now most used in the cities, it relates to that art which is to be an intimate everyday art in contributing to the structural beauty and efficiency of community life. Community life is not alone that of the great city or the small town, but of any group, however small and widely separated. A home far removed from other homes may be a part of a community, even if that community is an entire county. It is an integral part of some larger group and it has a relation to that group as a whole.

If it is worth while that there should be concert of action in the cities for the attainment of the beautiful, it is just as important that there should be the same effort by individuals and small groups of individuals in the country. That there is need for such effort in the cities calls for no argument, and that that need has been appreciated is evidenced by the marvelous growth of the civic improvement idea as illustrated during the past ten years, in particular, in cities and towns in all parts of America. There have been compelling influences in the cities for civic art which have been too powerful to resist. Where the race for commercial and industrial supremacy has been so keen that there has developed but slowly a realization of the importance of those things too frequently called purely aesthetic, there has been forced upon men and women the actual necessity of attention to the creation and maintenance of parks, of playgrounds for children and recreation areas for adults, of clean streets, of proper housing, of dignified public and private structures and of all those contributing agencies to an atmosphere that makes for health, happiness, good citizenship and material prosperity. Those cities that have neglected to provide these factors of community life are waking up to a full realization that they are falling behind in the striving for material development. They have discovered that there can be no efficient utility without corre-

sponding beauty. They go hand in hand and are inseparable. It may be that a pestilence of typhoid fever is the awakening agency to the need for cleanliness in municipal sanitary conditions and an awakening to a consciousness that polluted streams, dirty alleys and an absence of breathing spaces are causes of disease and death. It may be that a diminution of existing population or a falling off of that new population attracted to a properly organized and conducted community is the impulse for better conditions. Whatever the impulse, the issue is sure to result in a transformation from conditions ugly to those of beauty and sweetness. The banks of a river cleared because the drinking water has been contaminated, give way to river fronts that are utilized for parks and boulevards on the one hand and imposing business structures on the other hand. Both are equally important to the city that would be great in all respects.

It should follow that if the "City Beautiful," made so by the care of its citizens, is worth while, the "Country Beautiful" is just as worth while. Mother nature did well her part originally; foolish man has undone nature's work in the city and the country. The field for man's constructive and reconstructive labor is almost, if not fully, as broad in the country as in the city. The incentive may be even greater. First, because at present the drift of population is from the country to the city and it is essential that there go to the city men and women equipped at the start to take the part in those activities of the city that shall contribute to civic beauty. They should be teachers and not students. Second, there is the growing march "Back to Eden," and it is essential for more reasons than this article permits of enumeration, why that Eden should increasingly draw a larger and constantly larger population from the city. The city-bred man or woman, in particular the one who has lived in a community where attention has been given to art, is going to find that country life the most attractive that has surrounded itself with the largest measure of those refinements that contribute to happiness and culture. And this leads to a statement that there are material reasons why the rural dweller should be a part of every movement that proposes to improve his particular section of the country. It has been proved conclusively that painstaking care and large expenditures for art's sake have more than paid for themselves in the city. It may be equally true for the country. The commercial motive, however, is not, and should not

be, the great motive. The benefits from a material standpoint are but the corollaries of the other really valuable benefits. That they do follow cannot be overlooked.

Bearing in mind that civic art as most commonly used relates to the everyday surroundings, or what the everyday surroundings should be, what are some of the things that can be done in the country, such as are done in the city and how can they be done? With the importance of civic art established as of equal importance in the country as in the city, a comparison of the methods of attainment is natural and proper. Before pointing out the way to civic art the question arises, "Just what is civic art?" One writer says, "Art is the well-doing of what needs doing." Such a definition, of course, involves beauty. But beauty is not easily defined. Raymond Unwin, an English landscape architect, says of beauty, "It is an elusive quality, not always easily attained by direct effort and yet it is a necessary element in all good work, the crowning and completing quality. It is not a quality that can be put on from outside, but springs from the spirit of the artist infused into the work. We are too much in the habit of regarding art as something added from without, some species of expensive trimming put on. Civic art, the expression of civic life, is too often understood to consist in filling our streets with marble fountains, dotting our squares with groups of statuary, twining our lampposts with wriggling acanthus leaves or dolphins' tails, and our buildings with meaningless bunches of fruit and flowers tied up with impossible stone ribbons." William Morris said: "Beauty, which is what is meant by art, using the word in its widest sense, is, I contend, no mere accident of human life which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life, if we are to live as nature intended us to—that is, unless we are content to be less than men."

With the distinction, then, that art is not alone that which is found in the gallery or the studio, but the very expression of life in all its finer qualities, how may it be best expressed in the country? Surely there has seemed to be an absence of civic art in the rural sections just as there has been in the city. The older sections of the United States, the New England States, for instance, afford examples of a lack of expression of civic art, just as do many of the newer sections. The first expression of the instinct for improvement, for it must be conceded to be an instinct, though too often slow of

expression, is in and about the home. The rural home offers unlimited opportunities for improvement. Too often the only evidences of an habitation are the tools and implements of the farmer, scattered about his premises with little regard to orderliness and no attention to adornment, unless it be a tree here and there for shade, and the desire for shade may be one of utility without especial regard for beauty. The same spirit that has prompted hundreds of thousands of city dwellers to "clean up" their back yards and replace bare surfaces of ashes and other debris with growing grass, shrubs and flowers, may well extend to the rural home. The transformation of the country home from just an eating and sleeping place to a living place, by the introduction of home gardening, for the sake of gardening and its beauty, and not for its sustenance alone, will do wonders to keep the youth of those homes willing to grow up and abide in such an atmosphere. It will also check the progress of the men and women of those homes to the asylums which statistics show are largely filled with those whom the very monotony of the daily life of the farm has driven there. Each farmer's home may be an improvement society of itself and its object may be "to make home surroundings beautiful." Once the desire for beauty is firmly rooted, the possibilities for acquiring it are simpler than in the city, for the nearby woods may afford much of the equipment. It is not so necessary as in the city to go to the nurseryman and the florist, for nature has provided her stores near at hand. But the actual effort towards beauty must be exerted.

It is just as true in the country as in the city that man cannot live unto himself alone. He is his brother's keeper even if that brother lives a mile away and not just over the fence or porch railing, and to that extent there must be the united endeavor to create not alone the beautiful individual home surroundings, but a territorial or sectional improvement that shall be uniform and expressive of the best in all the life of that territory or section. The evidences of improvement should be revealed in continuous stretches and not in patches. For instance, the row of trees, and trees are just as beautiful in the country as in the city, should not stop with the yard limits. They should line the thoroughfares that lead to and from the town or market centers. Of especial importance is the embellishment of roadways. Not only are good roads necessary these days to make the carrying of farm produce eco-

nomical. Rural roads are being traveled over now more than ever before for pleasure, and that traffic will continue with the increased use of automobiles and the increase of wealth. Beautiful avenues are just as much a source of delight to the senses in the country as in the city. Reverting again to the material aspect of civic improvement, there can be no doubt that a county distinguished for its good roads and its beautiful roads draws to itself a traffic that is a source of profit. A section that is delightful and comfortable to pass through is surely a section that attracts newcomers as possible permanent residents, and some day they may be so many in number that there will grow up new communities, brought to the very doors of the farmers, because the people of the county have been enterprising enough to enhance the value of their holdings by attention to the finer things of life.

The same spirit that prompts the making of beautiful highways, for the sake of traffic, will do more than plant trees. It will keep the highways clean and smooth; it will spend money to keep them free of dust by the use of oil and water or both; it will smooth off the plots between the roadway and the fences, clear away fallen trees and debris. It will prevent the desecration of hillsides and rock exposures by unsightly outdoor advertising. It will even go so far as to unite in saying that board fences shall not be used to tell how many miles it is to the next clothing house or motion picture show. It will, however, recognize the demand of the traveler for guidance and information by erecting artistic signposts and guides. Some day when it is fully awake to its responsibilities it will pronounce against the unsightly telephone and telegraph posts that too frequently are permitted to mar the aspect of otherwise beautiful roadways even to the extent of cutting off the tops and branches of noble trees to make way for the wires. The telephone is a blessing to the rural district, but it does not need to be a blight to trees and to roadway beauty. One way to solve the telephone post problem, where the expense of underground installation is prohibitive, is to place the posts back from the road on private property, even if the companies do have to pay a nominal fee for so doing.

Cities are giving much attention to the adornment of triangles and squares formed by the junction of cross streets. The same possibilities exist in the rural districts. How much improved the

view might be if at the conjunction of roads a triangle, here and there, might be made a spot to pause at, for rest, yes, refreshment of the inner man and beast. On main traveled roads such triangles might be made to serve a very useful purpose for the installation of drinking fountains, the surroundings cleared and parked and speaking plainly that somewhere and by some one or some organized group advantage had been taken of an opportunity for the expression of civic art. Even country roads with the glories of nature visible everywhere may grow monotonous and the touch of man's hand be appreciated. Such triangles, shaped into order and beauty and so maintained, would speak in no indistinct tones for an awakened and ever-awake public spirit.

To attempt to enumerate all of the avenues that are open for definite civic endeavor in the country would take a volume in itself. Reference should be made, however, to the opportunities for the expression of civic art in the architecture of the rural structures with particular reference to the schoolhouses. A large movement is under way for better country schools, that is, schools that may stand out in the open as illustrations of what public edifices should be. It is not enough that there be four walls and a roof to house the children, wherein they may learn the three "R's." Not all the learning from schools is in the books. Nor is it enough to give the children books with pictures of the stately and dignified buildings of this and other countries. Their own schools should be examples to them, for their constant enjoyment and edification, of the best in architecture. No matter how limited the resources for the erection of the building, it should stand, when completed, as more than an illustration of the carpenter's work. It is always worth while to seek the counsel of experts for the execution of a public or community undertaking. Especially is it essential in erecting the buildings in which and about which the youth of the nation spend so many hours. Not only should the school building be a model of architecture, but its surroundings should be made attractive. Much of this attractiveness may be made possible by enlisting the activity of the children themselves. There should be frequent arbor days for the planting of trees about the grounds. And every provision should be made for play—directed play. The playground, so called, is by no means a crying need of the city. The country boys and girls need their playgrounds and they need play-

ground directors. One of the things we are learning well these days is that play is a most important factor in the life of the child and that he needs to be told how to play, whether of the city or the country. Next to the home the school should be the attractive congregating place of the rural districts, not alone for the children, but for the adults. Just as in the city there is a great forward movement for the utilization of the facilities of school buildings as social centers, so should the schools of the country be used. They should be erected with reference to public uses by the grown-ups, provided the building is large enough, with a hall that may accommodate meetings of the people for miles around who, when the civic improvement idea becomes well rooted, will need opportunities for assembling frequently to consider the things they ought to do and how best to do them. It must be remembered that not all town halls are accessible to the rural dweller. Usually, however, the public school is accessible to particular community groups. Considering art in its more limited aspects, there is a large opportunity for useful service by school buildings for the installation and display of traveling art exhibits. Several states have made possible the circulation of such exhibits, and when a quickened public sentiment demands them other states will follow the example. The art exhibit is not at all, of necessity, a city privilege.

How may these benefits that result from concert of action be effected in the rural districts? In many ways; possibly not in so many ways as in the city, where, in addition to the scores of women's clubs and civic leagues, there are boards of trade and other organizations to father and carry forward public undertakings. In the country there is the necessity of falling back more on the individual effort than the collective. But the individual need not work out alone and unaided his methods of procedure. He can call to his aid the experience of the men and women of the cities, through affiliation with national and local organizations that exist for the purpose of inspiring and assisting such improvement effort. In addition to these organizations there are the magazines and newspapers that are nowadays so rich in contents relating to definite things that may be done for home, neighborhood and town adornment. And in addition to these agencies should be mentioned the great service that federal and state departments of agriculture are giving with particular reference to the actual and intimate life of

the country. The day has passed when the well-organized state departments of agriculture confine their beneficent service to telling how to get the best crops from the soil. They are giving, as they should, much attention to the problem of making the life of the country an attractive life. Several of the state agricultural colleges are holding midsummer conferences devoted to a discussion of civics as well as planting and reaping. The harvest from such conferences is almost as valuable as the harvests of the soil, for they are to yield an enlightened citizenship and a cultured citizenship which, when it blossoms to its fullest, will free not only the country, but the cities of many of the administrative diseases that now exist because of ignorance and blindness as to the really good and true things of life.

But there are, even in the distinctly rural districts, opportunities for collective endeavor, and they are being utilized to a gratifying degree. The Grange grows continually in its service to the people as an institution from which there may proceed united action. The church is realizing its opportunity and is opening its doors on week-days as well as Sundays for the holding of meetings to consider community improvement, of a kind that produces direct results. Few sections of this country are now so sparsely settled that it is not possible to organize and maintain, usefully, some kind of a civic improvement league or society. There should be a great era of organization of such societies, for through them can be effected the things necessary to be done to bring about a harmony of treatment of thoroughfares, a recognition of the value of good architectural effects in the country school, the wise provision of playground areas, of children's gardens, the best direction of tree planting and care and almost countless other things that are too often left unattended to because no one or no group of people make it a business to see that what is necessary to be done is done. Town boards, like city councils, if not prodded by their constituents, are too likely to do only the things that it has been the habit to do for years past. These are new days—"The old order has changed," as William Allen White says. It is necessary that there be organizations and organizations, and then organizations, to constantly suggest new things, and new expenditures, too, for these new things involve expenditure, but expenditure that is worth while. There may be commissions on country life—would that there were more

and that their service might be uninterrupted—but back of them and inviting their aid must be the rural demand, expressed through some kind of an organization or many organizations.

When, in the country and in the city, the people, all the people, awake to the realization of what Professor Lethaby says, that “Art is the well-doing of what needs doing,” will we have a rural and an urban development that may truly be said to express real civic art. Then, and then only, will be made possible, easily, great state and national undertakings, such as transcontinental highways and vast park areas under national and state supervision. States will respond quickly to the call for state recreation areas; the federal government will open the way for a larger and more comprehensive development and administration of its national parks and scenic wonders. Selfish and unreasonable demands of commerce will give way, without resistance, to the demands of the people for the preservation of such glorious possessions as Niagara Falls and art will be the national and everyday expression that it naturally should be.